

Why teach Fine Arts?

Arvind Gupta

The fine arts include the visual arts – painting, theatre, sculptor and cinema. The visual arts were created primarily for aesthetic and intellectual purposes and judged for their beauty and meaningfulness. *Shantiniketan* established by Rabindranath Tagore strove to combine music, art, crafts with a broad humane education. *Shantiniketan* grew to become *Viswa-Bharti University* - one of India's most renowned places of higher learning. Its list of alumni includes Nobel-winning economist Amartya Sen, globally renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray and the country's leading art historian, R. Siva Kumar, famous writers Mahashweta Devi and Shivani, eminent artists like Ram Kinker Baij, Nandlal Bose and K. G. Subramanyan to name just a few.

Art is perhaps the best way there is of telling the truth. **Art keeps us hopeful.** Popular art throughout the world is full of pretty things. Look at Monet's water lilies and beautiful sunrises. This penchant for "pretty" worries some because it's not "serious" enough. But we need the pretty stuff, not because we're in danger of forgetting the terrible stuff, but because the terrible stuff weighs so heavily on us. Painting something pretty is an act of hope.

Art makes us less lonely. In a world that expects us to smile all times, it's easy to forget that we all carry around a lot of pain and anguish. By making private suffering public via say, a dark painting or a somber piece of music, we are comforted by being reminded that pain and suffering are a normal part of human existence. **Art helps us appreciate the world around us.** Cezanne showed us beauty in a bowl of oranges. In a world gone mad with celebrity and hype, art reminds us to take notice at the things that really do matter. Finally, the best art reminds us of our best selves.

However, of late the country's educational priorities have gone into a tailspin. There is a distinct pecking order and hierarchy in the choice of subjects students opt both at the school and college level. The intelligent students with high scores are supposed to opt for hard subjects – with mathematics topping the list, followed by physics, chemistry and biology. The students who do not score high are supposed to choose soft subjects like arts, history, commerce etc. Those who can't even cope with the soft subjects opt for the fine arts. What one chooses to study is largely dictated by the market. High salaries and perks seem to dictate choices.

During the initial years of the IITs, the 5-year integrated engineering course had a large sprinkling from the social sciences. In the early 1970s at IIT Kanpur, students did a total of eight humanities courses in the first eight semesters. Students could pick and choose from a fairly wide list of courses – English, Sociology, Economics, Political Science, Philosophy, Symbolic Logic, Development and Underdevelopment, History of Science etc. The humanities, lent engineering education, a human face. It helped students understand society better. They could appreciate that

most societal problems have historical contexts and they cannot be solved in isolation by simple technological fixes.

In 1970 a film club called the La Montage was set up in IIT Kanpur. Those were days when feature films came in big reels packed in steel trunks. Every week the students got to see one world classic. In 5 years we had seen every Fellini, De Sica, Kurosawa, Bergman and Satyajit Ray film. The institute also invited the best musicians to perform. As students we heard Pandit Ravi Shankar and Begum Akhtar alive. That's the hallmark of a great institute – to expose students to the best of our cultural heritage. These cultural events were integral, almost part of the curriculum. A good institute gets under your skin without you knowing it. It moulds students into a sensitive individual without making any fuss about it. That's why the experience of spending time in an enlightened campus, meeting bright peers and faculty is so essential. Today, in the era of the internet, the MIT – one of the most respected institutes in the world, has put all its courses online. Anyone can access them freely. But the MIT campus experience - interactions with the faculty, the fierce and open debates and cultural events, listening to Noam Chomsky is still every student's dream.

To produce more engineers the IIT course was slashed from 5 to 4 years in the 1990s. Technical courses took precedence over the humanities. The mandatory English course was retained but most of the other social science courses were thrown out. This resulted in the IITs producing “one-dimensional” engineers, who understood technology but nothing of the social, political or economic order in which it had to be applied. Alarmed by this the Government of India set up the Yashpal Committee to recommend positive changes in the IIT curriculum. The Yashpal Committee report (2014) strongly recommended more courses in the social sciences. It said that the IITs were places where new ideas germinated, struck roots and grew tall and sturdy. These unique places should cover the entire universe of knowledge. They were places where creative minds converged, interacted with each other and constructed visions of new realities. In these institutes established notions of truth were challenged in pursuit of knowledge. The Committee strongly recommended having artists, poets, musicians in residence at the IITs to give students a holistic education and an appreciation of their rich cultural heritage.

In 1959, the British physicist and novelist C.P. Snow drew attention to the schism between the Science and the Arts. The two cultures were the intellectuals (artists, writers) and the scientists. The twain did not meet, he pointed out as each group lived in its own universe. He envisioned a third culture in which the two groups would actually talk to each other. The boundaries between subjects have since been breached. Today every basic research is interdisciplinary. The more we understand about other disciplines the more relevant contributions we can make. Whereas SCIENCE gives us a rational world view of understanding the world it's the ARTS which give us deep human values.

Finally, scientists can be easily arm twisted by their political masters to make atom bombs and research on newer missiles to kill the enemies in alien lands. However, very few artists in history

have been war mongers. On the contrary artists understand the human predicament deeply so many of them are dedicated peaceniks.